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SEVERAL
ARGUMENTS
AGAINST
SWEARING and CURSING,
IN
Our Ordinary Conversation.

In a SERMON, Preached By the Most
Reverend Father in God, Dr. *John Sharp*,
late Lord Arch-bishop of *York*.

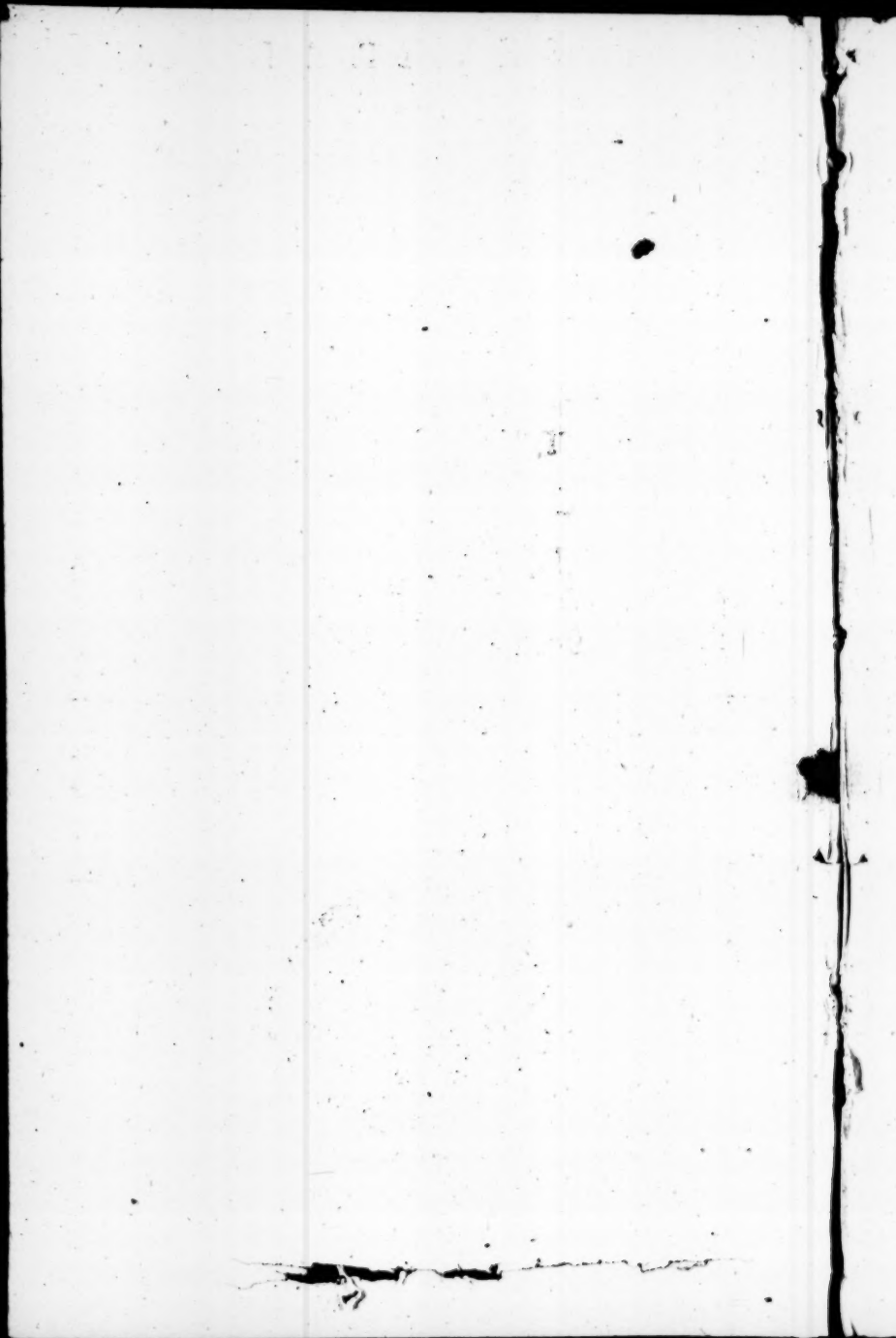
*Very proper to be read of a Sunday Even-
ing, by some of those who SPEAK LOUD
in the Streets of Dublin.*



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S E R M O N

P R E A C H ' D O c t o b e r t h e 1 2 t h , 1 6 9 0 .

James v. 12.

But above all Things, my Brethren, Swear not.

I Have chosen these Words of St. James for my Argument, which are as exactly levelled against the Sin of profane Swearing, as Words can be. *Above all Things, (saith he) my Brethren, Swear not.* Sure that must not be a little Thing, concerning which such Words as these are used to dissuade us from it. Sure, an Apostle of Christ, that was Inspired by the Holy Ghost, would not have said, above all Things, have a Care of such a Sin, unless that Sin had been of a more than ordinary Malignity; nay, unless it had been a Sin of the most heinous Nature. And yet it is no other Sin than Swearing; that Sin which is so common, and which is generally thought so small a Matter among all Sorts of People, that is here forbid in so earnest and so solemn a Manner.

I am sorry, indeed, there should be any Occasion for Preaching against such a Practice as this: One would think, that in a Civilized Nation, where Learning and Arts flourish, and where Politeness and good Breeding in our Conversation, is every where pretended to; and especially in a Nation, where the Authority of

our Lord Jesus is owned, and his Religion is professed, and that too, with greater Purity than in our Neighbouring Countries ; I say, in such a Nation as this, one would think there was no such Thing as Profane Swearing to be heard in Communication : But we should, upon all Occasions, use the Name of God with the greatest Reverence in the World.

But alas ! to our Shame, it is quite otherwise. No Practice is more common amongst us, than Swearing and Cursing. We out do the very Heathens, in our Profane Usage of the Name of God : No Order or Degree of Men, is free from it. The Gentleman and the Mechanick, the Person of Honour, and the Beggar, are equally tainted with this Vice. The Mouths of several of us are so used to Oaths, that they cannot tell a Story ; they cannot pass a Jest ; they cannot transact their Business ; nay, they can hardly ask a Question, or Answer one, without an Oath or a Curse. It is the Seasoning of all their Discourse ; it is to pass for the Evidence, both of their Wit, and Truth, and Sense too. Nay, the very Children in the Streets are perfect at it. The many of those that are not taught to say their Prayers, are yet taught to Swear and Damp roundly, in almost every Sentence they Speak. O God, whither doth all this tend, and what will be the Conclusion of these Things, if this Deluge of Profaneness which overflows our Land, hath not, through the Mercy of God, and the Care of the Government, some stop put to it !

I mean, at this Time, most heartily to set my self to shew, both the Sin and the Danger, and the Folly, and the Inexcusableness of this Vice. I will not pretend to say any Thing that is new to you, upon this Argument : But I only desire that the plain, obvious Things, which you have, perhaps, heard over and over again, and which every one may readily suggest to himself upon this Occasion, may be seriously weighed and considered by all of us. And if they be so,

Two Things I hope for : First, That some of those, at least that are guilty of this Fault, will, upon Consideration of these Things, endeavour to break themselves of it. And Secondly, That some others, who are not guilty of it, will yet be so sensible of the Mischief that it doth in the World, that they will do what they can, as Opportunity is offered them, to correct this Fault among those they converse with.

And in Truth, if those who are free from this Sin themselves, would but have the Charity, or the Courage, (as it fairly comes in their Way, and when they may do it without Offence, or breach of good Manners,) to Discourtenance it among those they have Dealings with, a good Step would be made towards the bringing it out of Fashion. For there is so little to be said for this naughty Custom, even by those that use it most, that if their Friends and Acquaintance would take a little Pains with them, there might be Hopes of their Cure.

I hope I may go a great Way towards the setting the Hearts of all serious and considering Men against this Vice, by shewing this, that taking all Things together, there is no Sin in the whole World, that doth afford more Arguments against itself, or for the Practice of which, a Man can say less in his own Excuse, or Justification, than this Sin of Profane Swearing. And if the Case be thus with it, who, but a Fool or a Madman, would ever use himself to it.

Now, for the making out this Point, there needs no more but to consider these following Things, which are all undeniably plain.

First, That it is a grievous Sin in itself.

Secondly, That it is attended with very mischievous Consequences.

Thirdly, That it is contrary to all good Manners, and good Breeding.

Fourthly,

Fourthly, That it highly differves, and destroys those Ends that a Man means to serve by it.

Fifthly, That what is pleaded in its Justification, still makes it more unjustifiable.

And Lastly, That it is a Fault that is very easily avoided, which still renders a Man the more unexcusable for continuing in it.

Of each of these Things in their Order.

First of all, It is a very grievous Sin in itself. No Man can doubt of that, that is, in the least, instructed in the Doctrine of Christianity. There is not any one Sin more plainly, more expressly forbid, by the Law of our Saviour, than that of Swearing. *I say unto you, saith he, Swear not at all : Neither by Heaven, nor by the Earth, nor by Jerusalem, nor by your Heads.* All these Forms of Oaths which are used in Conversation, are wholly forbid to Christians: Not only those Solemn ones, where the Name of God is Sworn by, but even the lesser ones, where God is not Named, but only the Creatures; all Sorts of Swearing in Conversation, is prohibited by our Saviour. Nay, his Apostle St. James, lays such a Stress upon this Command of our Saviour's, that he says, *Above all Things, my Brethren, Swear not : Neither by Heaven, nor by Earth, nor by any other Oath.* Surely that cannot be a slight Sin, that the Apostle is so vehement in his Caution against; *Above all Things, my Brethren, Swear not,* Why, he could not have said more against Murder, and Adultery, and Sacrilege, and Perjury. Not that I think that every Oath a Man Swears in his common Discourse, is a Sin of so horrid a Nature, as those I have now mentioned; but this is that I would Remark from hence, that Swearing is as directly and expressly forbid to Christians, as any of these Sins, and consequently must be a great Sin. And therefore, for my Part, I do wonder how any Man can call himself, or think himself a Christian, that lives in the Practice of it. It is a Thing so strictly forbid, and with-

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al, so much in a Man's Power to refrain, that I cannot believe a Man can have any Reverence of his Saviour, or any Regard in the World to his Authority, that can live in a Practice so directly contradictory to his most Sacred and Express Laws. Why, a Religious Turk will forbear, wholly, the Use of Wine, (tho' there be more Temptations to it, than that of Swearing) because his Prophet hath forbid it. A Devout Papist will not eat Flesh on a Fasting-Day, be he never so much tempted to it; though yet that is not a Commandment of God, but only an Ordinance of their Church. But yet we can live in the Daily Practice of Swearing, which is as expressly forbid by our Saviour, as any Thing in the World, and pretend all the while to be Christians. But it may be said, are there not many Sins that Christians are too often guilty of, which yet, for all that, do not hinder them from being good Christians. I Answer, Sins of Ignorance are, indeed, consistent with our Christianity; nay, and so also are Sins of Infirmary. But then, I much question, whether the Practice of Swearing can fall under either of these Notions. A Sin of Ignorance it cannot be, because we all know that it is a Sin. And as for Sins of Infirmary, they are chiefly committed in Two Instances; that is to say, either in the Failure of a Man's Performance; as for Example, when a Man doth not his Duty so well as he should do in any Case, or when he doth it not so often as he should do; or, Secondly, When through Inconsideration or Surprise, he falls into some Sin, which, if he had been careful over his own Mind, he would have avoided. These, I say, are Sins of Infirmary: But no Man that understands Things, can take that for a Sin of Infirmary, which is not barely an Omission of our Duty, but a down-right Transgression of a known Prohibition. No Man can take that for a Sin of Infirmary, which is not barely an Irregularity, or Disorderliness of our Passions and Appetires, but is a Sin of the
Action :

Action : Of the Action, I say, which every Man hath at his Command, though he have not the Motions or Passions of his Mind always in his Disposal. And Lastly, No Man can take that for a Sin of Infirmary, which is not one single Action, or an Action only now and then, upon extraordinary Temptation, committed; but is a Habit of Action, a Custom, a Practice, a Course that is as frequently repeated, as there are Temptations to it: No Man, I say, can think such a Practice as this to be a Sin of Infirmary, but must acknowledge it to be a Course of wilful Sin: And if so, then I am sure the Custom of Swearing in our Conversation, is as much a wilful Sin, as any other whatsoever. But how then it can consist with a Man's Christianity, that is to say, with the State of Grace and Regeneration, or the Hopes of Salvation in another World, let all such as are concerned, look to it.

But to go on with the Sinfulness of this Practice. We may be apt to look upon it as a slight Matter, and to be therefore only Evil, because our Saviour hath forbid it. But really there is a great deal more in the Thing. The taking of God's Name into our Mouths, upon every trifling Occasion, and especially Swearing by it, is a Thing really bad in itself, and which the Light of Nature doth sufficiently shew to be so. And therefore, all Men that had any Sense of Religion, even among the Heathens, did very seriously reprove the Practice of it, as well as our Saviour. Thus the Philosopher in *Stobæus*, "Some (saith he) advise Men to be careful to Swear the Truth; but I advise principally, that a Man do not easily Swear at all." To the same Purpose *Epictetus*, "Shun Oaths, if it be possible." And so likewise *Simplicius*, "We ought wholly to avoid Swearing, except upon Occasions of great Necessity." And *Plato* to the same Purpose, "The Name of God is not to be made Use of upon slight Occasions." And *Hierocles* tells us, "That the true Way to preserve the Reverence that

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" is due to it, is to abstain from Swearing." There is an infinite Reverence and Veneration due to the Name of God, which all those that use it slightly, or commonly, do violate. Here then is the Sinfulness of Swearing in our Discourse, that it is an Affront to God, a Violation of that Honour and Respect we owe to him, an impudent Abuse and Prostitution of his Sacred Name, against all the Reason and Religion in the World. In a Word, the Sinfulness of common Swearing and Cursing, lies in this, that it is Blasphemy; which certainly all Men, that have any Sense of God, must needs apprehend to be a dreadful Sin.

It is likely, many of those that are used to Swear and Curse, have other Notions of this Matter, and do not dream that they are guilty of Blasphemy. while they are calling to God to Witness at every Sentence they Speak, while they are Swearing by his Name, by his Life, by his Wounds, by his Blood; or while they are, in his Name Cursing, or Damning, or Confounding themselves, or others. But this is truly the Blaspheming of God, whether they think so or no: For I know no other Notion of Blasphemy, than that it is an unworthy, injurious, and contumelious Treating of God in our Words and Discourse.

Now, if Oaths and Curses in our common Discourse, be not of this Nature, I know not what is. What can be an Indignity put upon God, or a Profanation of his Sacred Name, if these be not? Every one must needs think so, that considers, that the Practice of these Things is a direct exposing his tremendous Name to Contempt; it is a making it Vile, and Cheap, and Despicable. It is a prostituting it to serve the Ends of our silliest Humours, our most foolish Passions, and our most Diabolical Furies and Transports. Nay, more than all this, it is a most impudent Appeal to God, to Witness every Foolish, Trifling, or Wicked Word that we speak; and if there be any Imprecation added to it, (as there is in all the *Damn me's*, and

Confound me's, that are used among us) it is a downright braving and hectoring God Almighty, and Challenging him to do the worst he can to us.

O poor Creatures! if God should vindicate his own Honour, while we are thus a defying him, and should strike us Dead for these execrable Profanations of his Holy Name, none could blame his Justice. But in what a miserable Condition should we then be. Oh the prodigious Degeneracy of Mankind! Oh the wonderful Patience and Clemency of the Maker of them! that they should continually thus dare God Almighty to make them Examples of his Vengeance; and that he should, instead of taking them at their Word, continue still to pour out his Mercies upon them, and thereby to engage them, if it be possible, to Repent.

I would to God that all of us, that have unhappily got this Custom of Cursing or Swearing, or are apt to take the Name of God idly, or vainly, into our Mouths, would consider seriously, what we are a doing, when we do so. Is it for us, who, at the best, are but Dust, and Ashes, but as we have made our selves, by our Sins are an Hundred Times worse; Is it for us to take the Name of God into our Mouths upon every little Occasion, and to sport our selves with it? For us who are grievous Sinners, and obnoxious upon a Thousand Accounts, to the Divine Vengeance, even for the most innocent Part of our Lives? For us, who are altogether precarious Beings, and cannot Subsist one Moment, without the Continuance of that Providence that brought us hither, and the repetition every Hour of Ten Thousand Mercies, more than we take Notice of? I say, is it for us to make light of the Name of that God that made us, and doth, every Minute, thus infinitely oblige us? Can we use that Name Irreverently? Can we, for the gratifying a silly Humour, or for the want of something else to say, or for the recommending our selves to a Set of Fools and Brutes, that we converse with, toss that

Name

Name in our Mouths without Fear, or without Wit? That dreadful Name, which all Mankind, that hath Sense, do Fear and Reverence? That Name, which we our selves, if we have any Religion, do invoke in our Prayers, and think we can never sufficiently express our Veneration of it? That Name, which when we do Pray, we Pray that it may be Hallowed and Sanctified, and preserved from Abuse and Profanation? That Name which is Privy to all our Blasphemies; and for any Thing we know, may confound us the next Moment, for our Profanation of it? That Name, which shall one Day be exalted over all the World, when God shall come to Judge Mankind, and call all the Impious Affronters of it, to a severe Account for their Blasphemies? That Name, which the Devils themselves (as hardned as they are) do Fear and Tremble at? And Lastly, That Name, which all the Holy Angels of God, in Heaven, do continually Adore, and yet they do not adore it without covering their Faces? (so Imperfect, so Nothing are the highest of Created Beings, in Comparison of the Name, the Majesty, of him that Created them;) I say, all these Things considered, can any one, that hath the least Grain of Sense, think, that this is a Name to be taken into our Mouths lightly, or rashly, or unadvisedly? Can any one, without Horror, think of putting it to common Uses, to tell a Story with, or to Answer a Question with, or to express a Passion with, or to make an Implement of it in our Drunken Humours, to fill up our Discourse, when we are at a Loss for other Words: and most of all, to call upon this dreadful Name (either in Sport or Passion) to Damn us, or those we speak to? Blessed God, for thy infinite Mercies, in Christ Jesus, forgive all of us, that have ever thus Abused and Profaned thy Holy Name, and let thy unspeakable Patience and Forbearance, which thou hast expressed towards us, in not executing speedily thy Vengeance, upon our Blasphemies and Profanations,

ons, as they justly deserved ; lead us, at Length, to such a Sense of the Honour of thy Name, and the Veneration that is due to it, that we may never more take it into our Mouths, but with that Reverence and Godly Fear, that becomes the Creatures of Almighty God, and the Disciples of our Lord Jesus. *Amen, O God, for Jesus Christ his Sake.*

But thus much of our First Particular, the Sinfulness of Profane Swearing. The Second Thing I have to represent about it (which is all that I shall trouble you with at this Time) is this ; that as it is a grievous Sin in itself, so it is also attended with very mischievous Consequences, and that both with Respect to the Publick and our selves.

First of all, to the Publick, this Sin is of very Evil Consequence in this Respect, in that it tends to abate and take off that Dread and Reverence that Men ought to have for Oaths, and by that Means weakens and loosens the Bands of Humane Society. All Mankind have, in all Ages, been aware, that there is no true Hank to be had upon Men, but by binding their Consciences, and that is no otherwise to be done, but by concerning God Almighty in the Matter, and ordering all those, of whom any Security for their Faith and Truth, in any Matter, was demanded, to make their Solemn Appeal to God, as a Witness, and as a Judge, that what they said was True, and what they promised they would Perform. This is that we call an Oath ; and accordingly, those Oaths have been from the Beginning of Society used among Men, as the best, and the only effectual Means, both to oblige Men to do their Duty in the particular Places and Offices they were trusted with in the Publick ; and to oblige them, likewise, to speak the Truth in any doubtful, controverted Matter, when they were called to give their Testimony. This, I say, hath always been the Practice of Mankind in all Ages, and continues so to be at this Day. And suitable to this, *Ci-*

cero tells us of the Romans, " That they had *nullum vinculum, ad astringendam fidem jure jurando arctius*. " They had no Tye so effectual, for the securing a " Man's Faith, as his Oath." And St. Paul, a greater Man than Cicero, hath told us, *That among Men, an Oath for Confirmation, is the end of all Strife*. Since, therefore, so much depends upon an Oath ; since the Publick is so much concerned in it ; since the Administration of Justice is so much influenced by it ; it will readily be acknowledged, that it is one of the greatest Concernments of Human Society, that all Men should be obliged to Swear truly ; and nothing can be of greater Mischief to the Publick, than that Men should be careless of their Oaths, and Swear Hand over Head, as their Humours, or their Passions, or their Interest, prompts them ; all the World will acknowledge this. And we, of this Nation, have as much Reason to be sensible of it, as perhaps any People in the World. Now admitting this to be true ; I Appeal to every Man, whether any Thing can be more pernicious to Human Government and Society, than such a Practice, which if it be admitted, doth naturally take off from Men all that Religion and Veneration they have for an Oath, and makes it, in a Manner, an indifferent Matter, whether they Swear truly or falsely. Yet such a Practice (and no better) is that I am now speaking of, the Practice of Oaths in our common Conversation. If the Devil himself was to study and contrive a Way for the disarming Mankind of that natural Reverence and Veneration they have for Oaths, and bringing them, without much Scruple of Conscience, to Swear any Thing, at any Time, whether true or false, as their own Interests, or the Importunity of others, did tempt them to it ; he could not, in the World, pitch upon a more effectual one than this : To make Oaths familiar to them upon all Occasions, to bring them into customary Use in ordinary Conversation. That Man that can Swear a Hundred Times a Day, when there is no

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Reason for it, I cannot imagine what Regard he can have for an Oath, when he is called upon to give it, when there is Reason. When a Man is come to that pass, that he hath used himself to call God to Witness for every Thing that he saith; nay, and to call upon him almost every Hour to Damn him, and Confound him, pray what is there to hinder such a Man, or what Reason is there to believe, that he will not call God to Witness, with the same Freedom and Unconcernedness when he is called to it in a Court of Justice? Would you make a Man's Conscience different, according to the different Places he is in, so that he may make a Conscience of Swearing in one Place, but yet shall make no Conscience of Swearing in all other Places whatsoever? I must confess, I am as willing to believe well of Mankind as is possible, and therefore I dare not say but there may be such Men found in the World, that in spite of the natural Consequences of Things, may be so honest, that though they do not fear an Oath in their Discourse, yet would fear one before a Magistrate. But this, I say, and I am sure of it, that nothing in the Earth doth more tend to make Men heedless and regardless of their most Solemn Oaths, than to inure themselves to the Practice of Oaths in their common Discourse. And I am very much afraid, that to this Practice, which hath so much obtained among us, we do, in a great Measure, owe those many false Oaths, that have deprived Men both of their Lives and their Estates, that we, at this Day, do not without Reason complain of. And therefore, certainly it concerns the Publick, if they would have the Reverence of Oaths kept up, if they would not have Faith and Truth lost from among Mankind, to suppress, as much as is possible, this vile, detestable Custom of Swearing and Cursing in our Conversation.

But Secondly, to Conclude, This Custom of Swearing, is not only of very mischievous Consequence to the Publick, but to our selves also. When I say this,

I do not mean the Mischief that it doth to a Man's Credit and Reputation, by giving Occasion to all the World to believe, that the Man that useth it, is a Man of no Conscience, that he hath no Religion, nor no Truth, which yet is the constant Fate of those that are much given to Swearing: I say, though this be a very mischievous Consequence of Swearing, and a necessary one too, and ought to be seriously considered by all those that give themselves up to this Practice; yet I do not here insist on it: It will fall more naturally under another Head. But that which I intend is this; that there is this Evil Consequence doth always attend the Custom of Swearing, that it engages a Man in a World of Perjuries, which he beforehand is not aware of, or if he was, he would tremble at the Thoughts of them. It is an old Observation, "He that Sweareth continually, (they are St. Chrysostom's Words) both wilfully and unwilfully, both ignorantly and knowingly, both in Earnest, and in Jest, such a Man, being often transported by Anger, and many other Things, will frequently Forswear himself. It is almost unavoidable, but a Man that is much given to Swear in his Discourse, (a Man that useth to bind every Thing he says, or every Thing that he promiseth, with an Oath) must say a great many Things that are not true, and must likewise promise a great many Things which he never performeth. In a Multitude of Oaths there cannot want Perjury, (as a Wise Man said.)

God help us, as the Condition of Human Affairs is in this World, there is no Man that considers well, that dare be accountable for the exact Truth of every Thing that he hath Occasion to say in Conversation, be he never so careful of what he saith. And if so, in what a Condition are those open Sluces among us, that vent every Thing that comes into their Heads, and serves to fill up Talk, whether it be News, or Stories of other Persons, or Fancies of their own, and

and clinch all they say with bitter Oaths and Imprecations.

I dare say you are all Sensible, that those who make a Practice of Swearing in their Talk, make no great Distinction about this Matter, and the Occasion upon which they use their Oaths. But they come from them in Course, without Thinking, without Deliberating, upon all Occasions.

How then is it possible, that in such a Multitude while Discourse as slips from them, they should not many Times a Day overset themselves, either in affirming more than is True, or in promising more than they make Good. And yet by their calling God to Witness to the Truth of such Things, they become really and strictly Perjured, and Forsworn; if, indeed, it be Perjury to Swear that which is false, or that we are not certain is true; or if it be Perjury to say a Thing that we do not mean to do.

I would to God, all that have accustomed themselves to take the Name of God into their Mouths upon slight Occasions, would seriously consider this; and withal, consider what a sort of Crime Perjury is: What a horrid Defiance it is of God Almighty, and what a Solemn Address made to him to destroy us, and confound us, if he either have Power or Justice.

But I have said enough upon this Head; as for the Four following which remain, I have not Time to Treat of them as they deserve, and therefore I shall reserve them to the next Opportunity.

I pray God give us all such a lively Sense of the Excellence and Holiness of his Nature, such a Sense of his Greatness, his Majesty, and Power, and Wisdom, and Justice, and Goodness, that we may in all our Thoughts, and Words, and Actions, give him that Honour, and Reverence, and Adoration, that is for ever due to his most Holy Name.

To this God Immortal, and Invisible, be all Glory, &c.

F I N I S.